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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

GENERAL ROSCOE ROBINSON JR. : HE OVERCAME THE HURDLE OF SEGREGATION TO BECOME THE ARMY'S FIRST BLACK GENERAL

An Individual Study Project
Intended for Publication

by

Lieutenant Colonel Duane E. Hardesty (Armor)

James W. Williams, Ph.D.
Project Adviser

U.S. Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Duane E. Hardesty, LTC, AR

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General Roscoe Robinson Jr., reached the pinnacle of his military career on 30 August 1982, when he was promoted to the rank of General in the United States Army. This was a significant achievement because he was the first black officer to reach this grade in the United States Army. President Harry S. Truman signed the proclimation that mandated the integration of the Armed Forces in May 1948. It took the Army thirty-four years to promote the first black officer to its highest rank. I believe that General Eisenhower was right when he said that man would someday overcome segregation because it was morally wrong to judge a person by the color of his skin. General Robinson overcame the hurdle of segregation and became the Army's first black General. The only question that remains is: will it be another thirty-four years before the Army recognizes another one? This paper briefly traces the Army's road to integration and General Robinson's experiences in overcoming segregation.

INTRODUCTION

Roscoe Robinson, Jr., reached the pinnacle of his military career on 30 August 1982, when he was promoted to the rank of General in the United States Army. This was a significant achievement because he became the first black officer to reach this grade in the Army. Why did it take the United States Army thirty-four years to promote a black officer to the grade of General?

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review the Army's road from a segregated to an integrated force and the impact that it had on General Roscoe Robinson, Jr. I wish to point out at the outset, that this paper will deal with the broader issue of integration vis-a-vis desegregation. From the very beginning, the Army looked at the much broader issue and always focused on the ultimate goal as being one of a totally integrated force.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The integration of the armed forces may have been inevitable in a democratic society, but it faced tough opposition. In many ways the military services were at the cutting edge in the struggle for racial equality.[1]

The integration of the armed forces was a momentous event on our military and national history; it represented a milestone in the

development of the Armed Forces and the fulfillment of the democratic ideal. All the services were subject to the same demands, fears, and prejudices. They all had the same need to use their resources in a more rational and economical way. All of them reached the same conclusion: traditional attitudes toward minorities must give way to democratic concepts of civil rights.[2]

What is meant by the words integration and desegregation? Desegregation simply signifies the act of removing legal barriers to the equal treatment of black citizens as guaranteed by the Constitution. Integration, on the other hand, implies much more. It includes the leveling of all barriers to association other than those based on ability, taste, and personal preference and ultimately meaning the random distribution of a minority throughout society.[3]

From the beginning the military establishment rightly understood that the breakup of the all-black unit would mean more than mere desegregation. The military constantly used the terms, "integration" and "equal treatment and opportunity", to describe its racial goals. Rarely, if ever, does one find the word desegregation in military files that include much correspondence from the various civil rights organizations. The military correctly chose goals of the Defense Department because, over a quarter of a century, the military came close to fulfilling the definition of integration.[4]

In the quarter century that followed American entry into World War II, the nation's armed forces moved from the reluctant inclusion of a few segregated blacks to their routine acceptance in a racially integrated military establishment. Nor was this change confined to military installations. By the time it was over, the armed forces

had redefined their traditional obligation for the welfare of their members to include a promise of equal treatment for black servicemen and women wherever they might be. In the name of equality of treatment and opportunity, the Department of Defense began to challenge racial practices deeply rooted in American society.

For all its sweeping implications, the goal of equality in the armed forces obviously had its pragmatic aspects. In one sense it was a practical answer to pressing political problems that had plagued several national administrations. In another, it was the services' expression of those liberalizing tendencies that were permeating American society during the era of civil rights activism. To a considerable extent the policy of racial equality that evolved in this quarter century was also a response to the need for military efficiency. So easy did it become to demonstrate the connection between inefficiency and discrimination that, even when other reasons existed, military efficiency was the one most often invoked by defense officals to justify a change in racial policy.[5]

Why were the Army's senior officers, experienced leaders at the pinnacle of their careers and dedicated to the well-being of the institution they served, so reluctant to part with segregation? The answer, according to Morris Janowitz in his book, The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait, lies in the reasoned defense of their position developed by these men during the long controversy over the use of black troops and so often presented in public statements and documents. Arguments for continued segregation fell into four general categories.

First, segregation was necessary to preserve the internal stability of the Army. Prejudice was a condition of American society. General of the Army Dwight D. Eisenhower told a Senate committee in 1948, that the Army "is merely one of the mirrors that holds up to our faces the United States of America".[6]

As General Omar N. Bradley saw it, the Army could integrate its training programs but not the soldier's social life. Hope of progress would be destroyed if integration was pushed too fast. Bradley summed up his postwar attitude very simply: "I said let's go easy--as fast as we can."[7]

Second, segregation was an efficient way to isolate the poorly educated and undertrained black soldier, especially one with a combat occupational specialty. To integrate blacks into white combat units, already dangerously understrength, would threaten the Army's fighting ability.

Third, segregation was the only way to provide equal treatment and opportunity for black troops. Defending this paternalistic argument, Eisenhower told the Senate:

> In general, the Negro is less well educated...and if you make a complete amalgamation, what you are going to have is in every company the Negro is going to be relegated to minor jobs, and he is never going to get his promotion to such grades as technical sergeant, master sergeant, and so on, because the competition is too tough. If, on the other hand, he is in smaller units of his own, he can go up the rate, and I believe he is entitled to the chance to show his own wares.

Fourth, segregation was necessary because segments of American society with powerful representation in Congress were violently opposed to mixing the races. Bradley explained that integration was part of social evolution, and he was afraid that the Army might move too fast for certain sections of the country.

General Eisenhower, as he did so often during his career, accurately distilled the thinking of his associates:

> I believe that the human race may finally grow up to the point where it (race relations) will not be a problem. It (the race problem) will disappear through education, through mutual respect, and so on. But I do believe that if we attempt merely by passing a lot of laws to force someone to like someone else, we are just going to get into trouble. On the other hand, I do not by any means hold out for this extreme segregation as I said when I first joined the Army 38 years ago.[9]

These arguments might be specious, as a White House committee would later demonstrate, but they were not necessarily guileful, for they were the heartfelt opinions of many Army leaders and opinions shared by officals of the other services. These men were probably blind to the racism implicit in their policies, a racism nurtured by military tradition. The fact that integration had never been tried before made it fraught with peril, and the forces of military tradition conspired to support the old ways.

Few national organizations and industries could match the Army in 1948 for the number of blacks employed, the breadth of responsibility given them, and the variety of their training and

occupations. Looked at in this light, the Army of 1948 and the men who led it could be classed as a progressive force in the fight for racial justice.

GENERAL ROBINSON'S ACHIEVEMENT

Roscoe Robinson, Jr., was born in St. Louis, Missouri on 11 October 1928. His father worked as a steel worker in a foundry in St. Louis. He was out of work much of the time becaure the foundry went through hard times during the depression years. In spite of this the Robinsons managed to survive.

His father stressed the importance of an education. He was not an educated man and knew that if his children were to have any hope of getting out of the situation he was in, the answer was through education. He wanted something better for his children. He told me about going to his father when he was 16 and asking for permission to work in the steel foundry. He said his father told him he didn't want him working in a steel foundry, but rather he needed to apply himself toward getting a good education.

General Robinson graduated from Sumner High School in 1946 and enrolled at St. Louis University as an engineer student. He was one of the first black students to be enrolled there. He told me he was the only black student in most of his classes. When I asked him about that experience he said he really didn't have any problems. He felt he had been well prepared for what he was facing. He gives most of the credit to his 8th grade teacher, Mrs. Davis. He said, "I went to segregated schools in St. Louis. Mrs. Davis' goal was to prepare

us for open society. She told us that we would not always go to segregated schools."[10]

He had never considered a military career until after his high school graduation. It was during his first year at St. Louis University that he was given the opportunity to go to West Point.

He was one of only nine black cadets at West Point in 1947. He recalls that the five black cadets in his class were required to room together. He roomed with two other black cadets while the other two roomed together in a seperate company. When I asked him if he felt he had been discriminated against he said, "I would never want to say that I was singled out because I was black. I know we were encouraged not to go to social events. That bothered me, but it certainly wasn't the end of the world. We were encouraged, and in fact, told very sternly that we were not to show up at the dance that was going to be held as cadets traveled to various posts during the summertime. I think I was very well prepared for what I was facing. It never occurred to me that it was something that was going to last forever. I always thought that once you got out of a segregated environment that things would be alright. Boy was I shocked. I think about it now and I laugh about it. I thought I was going to be accepted for the person that I was."[11]

When he graduated from the Academy he had hoped to be sent directly to Korea and a combat infantry unit. The Class of 1950 was sent directly to Korea and took heavy casualties. The decision was made to have the Class of 1951 complete their final year and go on to their respective branch schools prior to being sent to Korea. Following his graduation, General Robinson was assigned to the 3rd

Battalion, 188th Airborne Infantry Regiment, 11th Air Assault Division, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The 3/188th was still a segregated battalion. He recalls that his soldiers worked very hard to demonstrate that they were as good as anyone. He tells of one radio teletype operator who used to pass code wireless so fast that the guys on the other end would have to send him a message asking him to please slow down. General Robinson said, "He did it intentionally. He got a big chuckle out of it because he knew he could send faster than the folks up the line could receive."[12]

In commenting about the 3/188th, General Robinson said, "I would reiterate what I said before, the best thing that happened in that outfit was when it was integrated. It became a better outfit--no question about it."[13]

On 14 May 1951, General Ridgway forced the issue of integration by formally requesting authority to abolish segregation in the Eighth Army in Korea. He began with the 24th Infantry, which he wanted to replace after reassigning its men to white units in Korea. He based his proposals on the need to maintain the combat effectiveness of his command.

To soften the emotional aspects of the change, troop transfers were scheduled as part of the individual soldier's normal rotation. By the end of October 1951 the Eighth Army had integrated some 75 percent of its infantry units. The process was scheduled for completion by December, but integration of the rest of its combat units and the great number of service units dragged on for another half year. It was not until May 1952 that the last divisional and nondivisional organizations were integrated.[14]

It was in this environment that General Robinson arrived in Korea in late 1952. The 7th Infantry Division had just been involved in two fierce battles; Triangle Hill and King Company Outpost. The Division had sustained a great number of casualties, especially among the officers. He said that most of the lieutenants coming into the theater were being assigned to the 7th Division because of the casualties.

General Robinson was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment. All but one of the officers in the company he was assigned to had joined the battalion since the Triangle Hill battle. This included his company commander. All of them had been there for less than three weeks.

Thirty days after being assigned to the 1st Battalion, his company commander, Major George Wear, called him and two other 1st Lieutenants into his tent and told them they would each be given command of a company. General Robinson was given Charlie Company. He had just recently been promoted to 1st Lieutenant.

When I asked him how this happened he said, "We had a sudden infusion of older captains who had been in World War II. They had been called up for the Korean War. Major Wear said he had to have some company commanders who could hump the hills. He told us that he knew we didn't have an awful lot of experience, but he would give us as much help as he could in commanding our companies. It was quite an interesting experience. Major Wear kind of led us by the hand to make sure we did what we were supposed to do. He was there with us to give us good counseling---as much as you could get in a combat situation."[15]

The most significant aspect of this assignment was not that he had just recently been promoted to 1st lieutenant, but that he was one of only two black officers in the entire 7th Infantry Division to command integrated units during this period in the Korean War. Major General Arthur Trudeau who commanded the 7th Infantry Divison during this period, later said, "This was the first time that we had been integrated in combat. Some of the negro soldiers did a great job. I had two company commanders who were negroes and there was no problem with my soldiers at all."[16]

Following his assignment in Korea, General Robinson was reassigned to A Company, 503rd Airborne Infantry Regiment, 11th Airborne Division. However, he remained there only three months. The Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, was looking for a black officer to instruct there to comply with the directive to integrate service schools. General Robinson indicated that when he arrived at the Airborne Department he found other departments doing the same thing.

It was during this assignment that he began to serve with senior officers who recognized his extrordinary talents. He was given responsibility for the Pathfinder School and was one of the first black officers to be a platform instructor. Those who have had this opportunity know how difficult it is just to be selected to teach at Fort Benning.

During this period, he was placed in charge of the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference. This was a very high visibility program designed to educate civilian leaders on the capabilities of the airborne.

He said his most tense moment came when he was called to his committee chief's office and told he had just been credited with directly influencing an officer to quit jump school. The officer was a lieutenant from the Natioanl Guard who said he just could not tolerate a colored officer correcting him. His committee chief gave him high praise, indicating he didn't want a guy like that in the airborne.

Following three years in the Airborne Department, he attended the Infantry Officer Advanced Course. He was initially to be assigned to the 101st Airborne with two good friends, Shy Meyer and Joe Clemons, the hero of Pork Chop Hill. Instead he was sent to the military mission in Liberia where he was instrumental in training the Liberian Frontier Force. During our discussions I asked General Robinson if anyone in the State Department or Defense Department had ever asked for his observations on Africa. Much to my dismay he indicated that he had never been asked about Africa.

Following his assignment to Liberia, he returned to the United States and was assigned to the 82d Airborne Division. He said his primary goal was to command an airborne infanrty company in the 82d or 101st. He really didn't care which one. However, when he returned to Fort Bragg, he found there were no black officers commanding companies. He indicated that there may have been one or two commanding at the training centers, but certainly none in the line units. Fortunatley, he had an outstanding battle group commander in George Blanchard. It didn't take long before he recognized General Robinson's talents and gave him command of a company. This was the begining of a long association between

Generals Blanchard and Robinson. When General Robinson returned to the 82d in 1972 as a Brigade Commander, his Division Commander was General Blanchard. In 1978-80, General Robinson served as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans when General Blancahrd was the Commander-in-Chief, United States Army Europe and Seventh Army.

General Robinson distinguished himself as a capable combat leader again in Vietnam as the Commander of the 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division. His unit relieved the beleaguered Marines and South Vietnamese from Khe Sanh. They were instrumental in pacifying the famous "Street Without Joy" described in Bernard Fall's book on the Tet Offensive of 1968.

He went on to command at the brigade, division and corps levels. He commanded one of the United States Army's most elite units, the 82d Airborne Division. He was instrumental in cleaning up the logistical mess left in Okinawa after our pullout from Vietnam. He later commanded the United States Army Japan and IX Corps, where he made significant contributions to the training and professional development of the Japanese Defense Forces.

General Robinson reached the pinnacle of his long and distinguished career when he was promoted to General and assigned as the United States Military Representative to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In this assignment he was deeply involved in gaining commitments from our NATO partners for the employment of the Cruise and Pershing missiles. He retired in November 1985 after 35 years of distinguished service to his nation.

In reviewing his achievements he told me he never wanted to be remembered as the Army's first black General. He said, "I just want to be remembered as an army officer. Not as a black army officer. I just wanted to have the opportunity to serve my country and help people."[17]

I believe General Eisenhower was right when he said that man would someday overcome segregation because it was wrong to judge a person by the color of his skin. General Roscoe Robinson, Jr. overcame it and in spite of all the hurdles placed before him, he cleared them all and became the Army's first black general. The only question that remains is: Will it be another 34 years before the Army recognizes another one?

ENDNOTES

1. Morris J. MacGregor, Jr., Integration of the Armed Forces 1940-1965, (Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C., 1981) p. X.

2. Ibid., p. VII.

3. Oscar Handlin, "The Goals of Integration," Deadalus 95 (Winter 1966), 270.

4. Ibid., p. X.

5. Ibid., p. 3.

6. MacGregor, p. 227.

7. Ibid., p. 227.

8. Ibid., p. 228.

9. Ibid., p. 229.

10. LTC Duane E. Hardesty, The Oral History of General Roscoe Robinson Jr.(United States Military History Institute; Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 1988), p. 3.

11. Ibid., p. 14.

12. Ibid., p. 39.

13. Ibid., pp. 53-54.

14. MacGregor, p. 445.

15. Hardesty, pp. 58-59.

16. LTC John Landau, The Oral History of General Arthur Trudeau.(United States Military History Institute; Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, 1971), p. 38.

17. Hardesty, p. 421.